

Political and Lyrical

In Western culture since the time of Sappho, the lyrical mode is the voice of personal expression in poetry. Because it centers on the individual and private, it is often thought to be separate from the concerns and discourses of the public arena and political action. Because it always speaks in and of the present, even when referring to past and future, the lyric trades the sense of history built into narration for the sense of intensity built into the single voice. By collapsing past and future into memory and desire, the lyric imagination claims self as central and from this stance allows a privileged relation between poet and listener. Across centuries and across cultures the lyric poet sings directly to us. Immediacy is lyricism's power.

From the start, film and video locked into dramatic narration as the dominant discourse. The lyric was the exception--often ignored or forgotten. Operating on the margins, lyrical film/video developed its own concerns and traditions, usually with little apparent attention to the public sphere, for national and international events, for history. Even those who defend and promote lyrical work tend to take for granted an essential privatism. For example, in his presentation of U.S. experimental cinema, *Visionary Film*, P. Adams Sitney denies or leaves out the political dimension of the avant garde. Paired with the conservative art world's denial of politics in lyricism is the left's blindness towards and dismissal of progressive political statement in lyrical film and tape. Thus Dana Polan's "materialist" analysis in *The Political Language of Film and the Avant-Garde* surveys the New American Cinema and remains totally uncomprehending of Bruce Baillie's work and ignorant of other filmmakers who combine politics and lyrics.

With its insight that "the personal is political," the feminist movement gave a new understanding of the lyrical mode's power and potential. In re-establishing the artistic validity of autobiography, diary, personal testimony, intimate portrait, snapshot and home movie forms, feminist art presents a new understanding for all cultural workers of the political dimension of personal experience and expression. From such a vantage point we can look back at the left political tradition and see that there are precedents for linking lyricism and politics. Dovshenko's *Earth* from the Soviet 20s, or Jancso's *Red Psalm* from the Hungarian 60s are examples of extreme lyricism within epic narration. But it's within documentary that we find the strongest left tradition of lyricism and this is because although the lyrical is the voice of personal expressiveness, it can involve and evoke a different ordering of information and ideas, a new way of stating significance, a way of seeing things differently which pushes us to feel and think freshly and intensely. This is why the lyrical mode is so productive in politically motivated cross-cultural representation. We can think of the Vertov-Svilova collaborations such as *Three Songs of Lenin* or *Enthusiasm (Symphony of the Don Basin)*, made to show different regions

and experiences of the Soviet people to each other or Santiago Alvarez's Hanoi, Tuesday 13th or 79 Springtimes of Ho Chi Minh as films created for circulation within the Third World. Of course in these cases we have creative people who feel free to lunge into the deeply expressive and emotive without fear of losing their audience precisely because there is a bond of political commitment and a shared understanding of the issues at stake. Alvarez shows us a Hanoi which is essentially like Havana or any other Third World capital except that it is under daily aerial bombing seige. Almost any Third World person understands that it happens to be Hanoi which is bearing the concentrated weight of imperialism at that moment, but that it could well be and might well be their city, their country, next.

While socialist lyricism has a definite place and tradition in the socialist core countries, I think there is an important expansion of lyrical expression in current anti-imperialist film, video, and other image making. Some of this comes from the growing awareness in North America of how Latin American art trades much more freely in expansive expression, in direct emotional evocation, and passionate sincerity. In a time when younger artists in Europe and North America, in particular, are questioning the obsessive abstraction and formalism of a previous generation that was steeped in structural and minimalist concerns, the new acceptance of emotive expression is important for indicating an alternative to postmod cerebralism as seen in the knee-jerk simplicity of Barbara Kruger's graphics or the self-consuming SoHoism of Yvonne Rainer's films.

Chuck Kleinhans
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